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III.—THE NIGHT MESSENGER BOY

BY EDWARD N. CLOPPER,
Ohio Valley Secretary, National Child Labor Committee.

There is one occupation usually classed among the street trades, which for certain hours of employment needs not so much regulation, but prohibition, so far as minors are concerned. I refer to the messenger service during the hours of the night.

The National Child Labor Committee has made a special inquiry into the conditions surrounding the night messengers, in a large number of our cities during the past two years. While we were aware that these conditions were bad, we were not prepared for the really revolting facts our inquiry revealed. In the daytime the messenger boy's work consists of the unobjectionable task of delivering telegrams about the city, but after nine o'clock at night the character of his duties undergoes a radical change; from that time on until two or three o'clock in the morning his work is almost exclusively the running of errands in connection with the three great evils of gambling, drink and prostitution. Calls come to the messenger offices over the telephone from hotels, drug stores and saloons, asking that messenger boys be sent at once to where the patrons await them. No inquiries are made by the office as to the character of the work to be done nor the destination of the boy. The patron is free to use the boy as he sees fit and to retain his services for as long a period as is desired, paying the boy at a fixed rate per hour, or for the errand if it requires but a short time. Prostitutes call in messenger boys to perform for them a surprising variety of services. The boys get them chop-suey, chili-con-carne, liquor, tobacco, opium, medicines and articles used in their trade, deposit their money in the bank and one instance was found in which a boy was actually required by a prostitute to clean up her room and make her bed. In responding to a call the messenger not only enters the house of prostitution, but usually goes into upstairs rooms where the inmates tell him of the work they wish to have done, and so these boys are drawn into close association with the denizens of the underworld.

The great objection to the employment of boys in the night messenger service is that it not merely gives them the opportunity to become acquainted with the evil side of city life after dark, but, by the very nature of the work, it actually *thrusts* them into contact with these vicious elements of society. Just the other day in Louisville where we were arguing before the City Council in favor of a pending ordinance providing for a higher age limit in the night messenger service, the opponents of the measure, who represented the telegraph companies, declared that they did not approve of sending boys to evil resorts, that they never allowed them to go to such places and that they employed them after dark only in legitimate kinds of work. But the results of our investigations in Louisville and other cities show that the night messenger service exists very largely on account of the patronage of prostitutes and other disreputable characters. The companies cannot control the boys after they leave the office unless detectives are sent along with them, because they do not always know where the boys are to go; they cannot be sure of the nature of the errand as it would be foolish always to rely upon the statement made by patrons over the telephone when calling for messengers, even if the office demanded to know for what purpose the boy was wanted.

So these boys in every city are nightly moving in an atmosphere of utter degradation and witnessing scenes, the description of which would fill one with horror. We have noted among the boys who have been in this work for a considerable period a moral degeneracy which is appalling. Many of them suffer from severe forms of venereal disease and their whole moral nature has been deadened. To protect boys from the evil consequences attending their employment in the night messenger service, we declare that if such work is to be done at all it should be done by men and *not* by boys. New York State has declared that no boy under twenty-one years shall work as a night messenger in any city of the first or second class, and Ohio has fixed the age limit for this work at eighteen years.